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ABSTRACT

This document considers school violence by reviewing the school environment, assessing the difficulties and causes of violence, and offering solutions to the problems. One study describes risk factors for aggressive behavior among middle school students and presents steps that can be taken to prevent the development of such behavior. Several presentations from the 1999 Conference on Children, Culture and Violence are summarized. Synopses of other conference presentations and publications are also included. A description is provided of Peaceful Kids ECSEL (Early Childhood Social-Emotional Learning) Program, an outreach program at the Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution that introduces skills for constructive conflict resolution to school-age children. (JDM)

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Examining School Violence

Barry Rosen, Diane Dobry, Heather Andrews, and Deidre Reznik, Editors

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Examining School Violence

On April 20, 1999, two teenagers dressed in black trench coats arrived at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, with an arsenal of weapons. They succeeded in carrying out one of the deadliest school massacres in American history, creating a national concern that led to a large-scale investigation into violence as a public health issue.

The occurrence of previous incidents in Oregon and Arkansas, where children in schools shot their classmates and teachers, and in Conyers, Georgia, only one month after the Columbine killings, narrowed the focus to school violence, teenage violence and gun control.

The media has put these communities in the forefront of the search for the causes of teenage violence. But violence has been a concern of inner-city and minority communities for decades. Long before there was an incident in Littleton, Colorado, Teachers College faculty and institutes were committed to understanding and ameliorating the causes and problems of school violence and the understanding that violence is not limited to weapons. An increasing number of incidents of sexual harassment, another form of violence and abuse, are also coming to light in schools throughout the country.

Shortly after the incident in Littleton, *The New York Times* quoted Dr. Jim Mercy, associate director for science in the division of violence prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as saying, "The reality is that schools are very safe environments for our kids."

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Examining School Violence CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Yet, the massacre was the sixth multiple-victim shooting in 18 months. People yearn for explanations and are disturbed to think that not everything is under their control, the article noted.

What makes the Littleton shootings so unusual is that it seemed as if all the pieces were in place that should have been. The county had one of the few juvenile assessment centers in the country. It is an affluent and well-educated community. Health care is not a problem for the children in Littleton schools. Eric Harris, one of the gunmen in the shootings, was under psychiatric care. Yet, in spite of things being seemingly under control, young people died at the hands of their peers.

In the aftermath of the shootings, President Clinton convened a meeting to address the causes of incidents such as these. Within a month of the shootings, the Senate passed a bill that would require child safety devices on handguns, though there was opposition to adding more restrictions.

Clinton also ordered an investigation by the Justice Department and Federal Trade Commission to examine marketing practices by the entertainment industries to determine if they were luring children to watch violent films, listen to explicit music and play murderous video games. This followed an announcement by Surgeon General David Satcher of a new study that will look at the roles of popular culture, peer pressure, mental illness and the availability of guns in triggering homicidal rage in young people.

A statement signed by the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry concluded that, "viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children." Research, they said, clearly shows that young people have developed a higher tolerance for violent behavior in general.

CNN reported in August, 1999, that four out of five middle school students admit that they act like bullies at least once a month. A study conducted in a Midwestern middle school found that 80 percent of students said their behavior included physical aggression, social ridicule, teasing, name-calling and issuing threats.

Although statistics show that school violence declined from 1991 to 1997, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that it is still unacceptably high. Between 1994 and 1998, studies indicated 173 school-associated incidents, most of which were homicides involving the use of firearms. While the total number of events has decreased since 1993, the total number of multiple-victim events has increased, with an average of five multiple-victim events per year. The National Center for Education Statistics also reported that there were almost twice as many gangs in schools in 1995 compared to 1989.

Schools, for their part, have instituted increased security measures with surveillance cameras and security guards monitoring activities throughout school buildings. In some places, students have to swipe a computerized ID card just to get in the door or pass through metal detectors and trade in canvas backpacks for transparent bags to make it difficult to conceal a weapon.

Yet not everyone agrees that physical security is the answer, since Columbine High School did have security guards and Heritage High School in Conyers had surveillance cameras. Many districts are focusing on recognizing and defusing threats that could lead to violence. Teachers are being taught what symptoms to be aware of that would indicate students who are prone to violence.

Teachers College continues to be concerned with studying the school environment, assessing the difficulties and the causes of violence, finding solutions to the problems, and disseminating the information to the public. Some of the initiatives taking place through the College today include a study funded by the Spencer Foundation to look at the risk factors for aggressive behavior among middle school students. Professors Marla Brassard, Charles Basch, Suniya Luthar and Margaret Terry Orr are working with student fellows to examine steps schools can take to prevent the development of aggressiveness in young people.

As Director of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR), Assistant Professor Peter Coleman is continuing the work of Morton Deutsch, E.L. Thorndike Professor Emeritus, who directed the Center for many years. Deutsch was a pioneer in the study of intergroup relations, conflict resolution, social conformity and the social psychology of justice.

Coleman works with his staff to bring conflict resolution skills to schools and others in the community. Through programs such as the Peaceful Kids ECSEL (Early Childhood Social-Emotional Learning) Program, the Center works with children, teachers and parents to introduce skills for constructive conflict resolution.

> The research clearly shows that young people have developed a higher tolerance for violent behavior in general.

"Children, Culture and Violence," a conference coordinated by Professor John Broughton, brought together experts who research and address issues of school violence. Virtually every presentation focused on two fundamental questions: What are the roots of violence? And how can we break the cycle of violence?

Erwin Flaxman, Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, through a grant from the Metropolitan Life Foundation, is engaged in providing a series of short analyses that look at issues that are significant to scholars. The grant not only allows them to work with project leaders to determine the impact of what they are doing, but also allowed IUME to hold three conferences that looked at ways to improve efforts to address school violence issues.

Is there something about the middle school experience or the ages between 11 and 14 that engenders aggression in adolescents? Four Teachers College faculty members and four graduate students have been commissioned by the Spencer Foundation to find some answers.

"In the sixth grade, very few kids have problems with aggression," Professor Marla Brassard noted. Yet, by eighth grade, the levels of aggression to teachers and peers normally increase. "We want to see them before it develops and see the processes that affect the likelihood that these problems will develop."

Professors Brassard, Charles Basch, Suniya Luthar and Margaret Terry Orr, with four Spencer Fellows, are examining risk factors for aggressive behavior to determine which are amenable to change. At three middle schools in Massachusetts, the researchers began in 1999 to collect data on 1,100 sixth graders entering seventh grade. They will follow up with students once a year through eighth grade to see which factors affecting behavior relate to young people who have more serious problems.

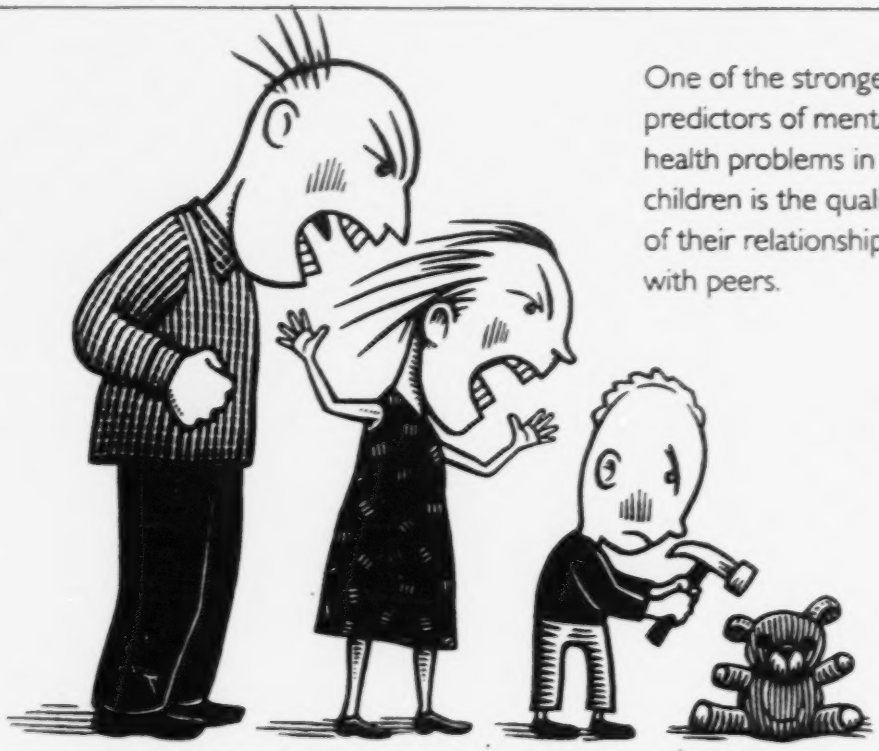
Professor Orr is looking specifically at the ways that school-wide policies and practices affect teenagers. These include discipline methods, alternatives for handling conflict and aggression between students or between students and teachers, and the availability of influential adults to listen to students.

Professor Luthar will be comparing low- and high-income schools to identify specific influences that lead to the development of aggression, mental health problems and substance use.

Professor Brassard, whose work over the past decade and a half has dealt with psychological maltreatment and verbal aggression, has been examining issues of peer victimization and parental psychological aggression in early adolescence. She describes psychological aggression as behavior that is intended to inflict psychological pain on another person, such as swearing at someone, calling them names, and physically threatening them.

Spencer Grant Studies

Research: Nipping Aggression in the Bud



One of the strongest predictors of mental health problems in children is the quality of their relationships with peers.

Her work, and that of others has shown that psychological abuse and neglect are the most common forms of maltreatment and are as damaging as other forms of abuse and neglect.

Preliminary findings of this research were presented by Brassard, Basch and students David B. Hardy, Michelle Butterfass and Dennis Vogel at the American Psychological Association Conference in August 2000.

Brassard and her colleagues reported that one of the strongest predictors of mental health problems in children is the quality of their relationships with peers. The development of healthy

"Most kids see their relationships with teachers as among the most positive relationships they have."

relationships with peers is ultimately affected by relationships children have with caregivers and parents. Those children who are exposed to circumstances that undermine their health and well being, such as conflictual relationships with parents, often exhibit excessively aggressive behaviors and a lack of empathy toward others. This can lead to a lack of social competence and poor peer relationships.

In their study, Brassard and the other researchers found that students who were subjected to parental psychological abuse were immature by comparison and exhibited more depressive symptoms and less self-regulation than those students who had less parental psychological abuse or maltreatment. When students were psychologically maltreated by their parents and victimized by peers, they were significantly more depressed than those who were not victimized by peers. Their findings supported the belief that children exposed to psychological abuse by parents and caregivers have more difficulty developing and regulating their emotions, and tend to be more likely to turn to aggression in dealing with others.

Research Brassard did with Caroline E. Crutcher, Butterfass and Basch also indicated a gender-based difference in responses to maltreatment or abuse by parents. Boys were more emotionally distressed when they were psychologically abused, whereas girls were more distressed by believing they were emotionally neglected. "The kids who are most at risk are those who perceive their parents as being psychologically aggressive toward them and as not caring about them," Brassard said. "Almost all of the sixth graders reporting both delinquency and depressive symptoms were in this group."

She added, "Kids who feel their parents care about them will do better even if parents are psychologically aggressive, or if they seem not to care about their children, but are not abusive. Children in these two situations will be better adjusted, although not as well adjusted as kids who feel cared about by their parents and are not threatened or yelled and sworn at."

Another focus of the research is student-teacher relationships. With Bethany Casarjian, who earned her Ph.D. from TC's school psychology program, Brassard looked at the student-teacher relationship and its affect on student behavior. She found that the level to which students see a teacher as being psychologically aggressive will affect the psychological or physical aggression a student says he or she will display toward the teacher. The teacher's level of psychological aggression also affects how students say they see themselves academically, how they will value the subject being taught, and the level of emotional and behavioral engagement they will exhibit in the classroom. Although aggressive students are more likely to perceive their teacher as being psychologically aggressive to them, even students who are not aggressive will respond aggressively to a teacher whom they perceive to be psychologically aggressive.

The Spencer team is now trying to determine the extent to which students' aggressive behavior toward teachers is in response to a "mean" teacher or to a teacher who is reacting to the students' provocative behavior.

"Most kids see their relationships with teachers as among the most positive relationships they have," Brassard noted. "They agree on which teachers treat kids in a supportive manner and promote learning behavior and they agree on which teachers don't." These findings, she said, are important in developing effective teacher training.

In October of 1999, Teachers College hosted a Conference on Children, Culture and Violence under the direction of John Broughton, Associate Professor of Psychology and Education. Other conferences and literature are continuing to be offered through work being done by Erwin Flaxman, Director of the Institute on Urban and Minority Education (IUME). Through these initiatives, the College remains an important source of information and education for policymakers and educators who must make decisions about issues of school violence.

In a panel discussion on *Enculturating Violence* presented at the Conference on Children, Culture and Violence, Assistant Professor Nancy Lesko discussed the need for connection in her presentation about "The Construction of Male Behavior and Identity." "Violence is the final link in a chain that begins with basic disconnection between children and parents," she said.

Boys, she explained, are four times more likely to kill themselves than girls and are less likely to graduate from high school. "Many are sad, confused and hurt, and feel they have to fight vulnerable feelings."

Panelist Mark Bracher of Kent State University elabo-

rated by saying that the root cause of violent behavior is a "vulnerable identity." Citing a study by James Gilligan, Bracher said that men in prison committed violent acts to enhance their identities and that violent behavior happened in defense of one's identity being threatened in some way.

In order to reduce the tendency toward violent behavior, Bracher said that children need to feel less vulnerable and more resilient. What needs to happen, he said, is an alteration in what makes up a child's identity, particularly the principles we use to evaluate and compare differences. There also needs to be a reduction in the opportunity and resources necessary to being destructive, and an increase in the opportunity for more benign things like body image and performance to be enhanced.

Keynote speaker James Garbarino, Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, spoke about five risk factors leading to violence, which were compiled through interviews with young people in jail.

The first risk factor is rejection. Kids in any culture who are rejected exhibit what is bad in that culture, he said. Rejection can take the form of parental abandonment, abuse or impoverishment, or it can be subtle, school-based rejection.

The second is spiritual emptiness, which he described as a hole that needs to be filled. This emptiness can lead to a sense of no limits to behavior and the feeling of being alone and angry.

Third is the structure of adult authority within the family. Legitimate adult authority exists on behalf of justice and is not exhibited in a tyrannical manner. "Most acts of violence are made to relieve acts of perceived injustice," Garbarino explained. And the greatest injustice is the lack of respect. Adults need to take charge of situations, Garbarino said, because "when kids believe adults are no longer powerful, they take matters into their own hands. Many school shooters see themselves as avengers...as doing something right that other people aren't brave enough to do or committed enough to do."

Many school shooters see themselves as avengers...as doing something right that other people aren't brave enough to do or committed enough to do.

The fourth factor is social toxicity. "Some kids are particularly vulnerable to social toxins around them and will do whatever is bad in the culture," he said. One source of social toxicity comes from the various media available to young people, such as point-and-shoot video games. People have a natural inhibition toward killing that has to be trained out of them, Garbarino explained. The army uses the same type of video games that children play to train soldiers to kill.

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The fifth factor is the influence of peer culture. "You could have a perfect understanding of a kid, but if you don't know his peers, you can't accurately perceive the risk," Garbarino explained. With the birth of the Internet, young people are able to find others who think like they do. Things that these young people might not do alone tend to be easier to do when they have others who support them.

Reports and Conferences: Getting the Word Out

In an effort to determine what works and does not work in dealing effectively with violence and aggression, the Metropolitan Life Foundation is supporting a program that will look at the impact of specific projects being undertaken and analyze whether changes need to be made to improve their effectiveness. Erwin Flaxman is heading that program, and through the initiative, is offering literature to educators and parents that describes research findings. In addition, the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) headed by Flaxman, offered conferences that addressed issues of school violence.

At one conference held in March, 1999, Dr. Beverly Coleman-Miller, visiting professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and nationally renowned authority on domestic violence, delivered the keynote address. She spoke about school violence as a community health problem that must be dealt with systematically through the child, family, neighborhood and community. These relationships act as an ecology, stimulating or reducing occurrences of youth violence. Her address opened a two-day workshop in which participants examined the assumptions and dynamics of their programs to determine their effectiveness.

Another conference, in the fall of 2000, looked at more than 100 projects being undertaken in the area of school violence to determine what types of assistance the leaders of these projects need. Through this needs assessment, IUME and Teachers College can provide assistance through organizations, agencies and universities that have the expertise and capability of helping these project leaders meet their goals.

As part of IUME's outreach to scholars, literature on the topics germane to issues of school violence is being compiled and distributed to the public. One piece in particular, written by Gene Maeroff, former national education writer for *The New York Times*, and current director of The Hechinger Institute for Education and the Media at Teachers College, discusses the link between school violence and media.

Maeroff looked at media coverage of juvenile violence and its effect on public opinion, violence as media entertainment, and violence in print and visual media. He cited a report that says that although incidents of youth violence have been decreasing, public fears about such incidents have been mounting. Other studies indicate that "the media (may) help stir fear by focusing on the relatively few fatal incidents inside school buildings." He references Kathryn C. Montgomery of the Center for Media Education as saying that two-thirds of the media's coverage of crime deals with acts by juveniles though they are responsible for only one-third of the crime committed.

"Television programs, movies, video games, and even pop music…seem not to hesitate to depict violence," Maeroff wrote. He noted that video games, not in existence a generation ago, include such fare as one which allows players to "inflict all sorts of gradations of injury, from shooting off arms, to putting bullets into the enemy's throat, to putting a bullet in the 'right' place in the stomach to make the guts exude."

Although incidents of youth violence have been decreasing, public fears about such incidents have been mounting. Studies indicate that "the media (may) help stir fear by focusing on the relatively few fatal incidents inside school buildings."

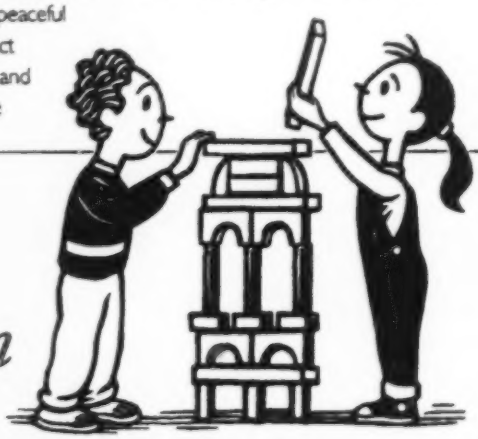
Although studies indicate that violence in electronic media can be particularly harmful because children relate more readily to visual images, some say that those most inclined to watch excessive violence may already be predisposed to violence. Maeroff also cites reports that found that watching violence does tend to desensitize young viewers and lead to aggressive behavior.

He summarizes his report by saying that while most editors believe that events sensational by nature should not be confused with sensationalism, with the increase of Internet news sites, there is a new rush to be first with a story on the Web. Schools, he cautions, in their quest to eschew violence, should create educational models rather than enforcement models—paying close attention to school climate, practicing democracy within schools, teaching students conflict resolution skills and using peer mediation.

Other publications written as part of the IUME Metropolitan Life Project are:

- *Girls and Violence* (Dr. Jeanne Weiler, Hunter College), which points to risk factors for the slightly increasing incidence of violence among girls, and makes the critical point that girls, when arrested, are likely to be arrested for "status" crimes, like running away, prostitution, or curfew violations, not for violent offenses.
- *Victims of Crime in the Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Schools*, in which author Dr. Daniel Flannery outlines the psychological and social response of youth to victimization. He also looks at necessary intervention.
- Professor Peter Coleman, Director of ICCCR at Teachers College, is the author of a publication that explains systematic responses to preventing and ameliorating violence in the schools at all levels—through the students, programs and curriculum, teachers, administration and community.

Outreach: Peace Promotion



Children, and most adults as well, tend to see only two choices in a conflict situation: fight for what you want, or give up and give in. So says Dr. Sandra Sandy, creator and Executive Director of the Peaceful Kids ECSEL (Early Childhood Social-Emotional Learning) Program, an outreach initiative of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR) at Teachers College. This program is just one aspect of the "broader systems" approach to schools advocated by the faculty and staff of ICCCR.

By applying current research on early brain development, the Peaceful Kids ECSEL Program brings social and conflict resolution skills to children who are ripe for acquiring and retaining communication, language, and problem-solving abilities that are likely to result in lifelong patterns of behavior. Through workshops that incorporate songs, puppets, partnering tasks, and turn-taking, preschool children are encouraged and shown how to develop various solutions to solve problems. Program staff members train school teachers, staff and parents to help children identify problems, brainstorm possible solutions, take the perspective of others, cooperate and communicate with others, and exhibit self-control.

Assistant Professor Peter Coleman, Director of ICCCR, described the work that the Center does in relation to school violence as teaching people to resolve conflicts more constructively, which is a preventive strategy for reducing violence.

While schools cannot address all the problems associated with violence, Coleman said, schools can play an important role. As a major influence in shaping the prosocial means of getting one's needs met, a school can provide educators and school staff members with skills for resolving conflicts. Peer mediation systems and classroom curricula and activities can further enhance the development of a peaceful culture in the school environment.

ICCCR works with groups from pre-school and elementary school to adolescents and adults. Their approach is to work with the whole system rather than just one part in order to change the culture of the school at four levels: the *disciplinary*, the *curricular*, the *pedagogical* and the *cultural*. From this perspective, the interventions are aimed at individual students and adults as well as in school systems.

Most frequently, administrators are eager to develop a peer mediation program as a first-level intervention for student disciplinary problems, incidents of violence or the threat of violence in the school. Both students and teachers are selected as mediators and are given 10 to 30 hours of training and follow-up supervision. As a result of these programs, research shows that disciplinary referrals, detentions and suspensions drop significantly, while school climate tends to reflect a more positive tone. Student mediators develop self-confidence and esteem.

However, peer mediation alone is not enough to prepare students to live in a peaceful environment. Conflict resolution concepts and skills also need to be introduced into curriculum in ways that accommodate the age and background of the students. Common goals of the individual programs include instilling attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to promote effective problem solving and cooperation while discouraging attitudes and responses that result in win-lose situations.

Two teaching strategies incorporate these skills into regular subject areas. They are cooperative learning and academic controversy.

Through cooperative learning, students are helped to understand the value of positive interdependence through mutual goals, division of labor, division of resources, materials and information among group members, and through joint rewards. In this way, they are taught that it is to their advantage for other students to learn well and to their disadvantage for others to do poorly.

Looking at controversy in a cooperative context promotes academic learning and the development of conflict resolution skills through discussion of topics from different points of view and reaching a consensus.

The establishment of conflict resolution programs in schools is combined with research being done on the effects of such programs. A 1992 study showed that at-risk students trained in conflict resolution and cooperative learning experienced increased social support and felt less victimized by others. Improved relationships with others enhanced self-esteem and feelings of well being, and resulted in a decrease in anxiety and depression. The positive feelings of well being led to better work readiness and performance and higher academic performance.

Research studies done on the impact of cooperative learning compared to competitive or individualistic learning showed that students working in group

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

Outreach CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

situations developed greater mutual commitment, helpfulness and caring, regardless of differences. They were also better able to take another's perspective. Students reported having a greater sense of self-esteem and a greater sense of being valued by their peers. Attitudes toward learning, school and their teachers also improved, as did their ability to work collaboratively.

While the idea of a peaceful, conflict-free environment sounds good on paper, not everyone is ready to do what it takes to achieve those results. Sometimes parents and teachers have misconceptions about cooperative learning that create initial resistance. Research shows that unless schools and school districts are sufficiently motivated to embrace an initiative of transformation such as this, it is not likely to succeed. All the players have to buy in to the program.

Even when they have bought into it and begun to learn the skills it takes to systemically change over to a cooperative learning environment, it can take teachers about three or four years before they feel well-skilled in using cooperative learning methods. It is important that all of those involved are given the skills to motivate and persuade, organize and mobilize themselves and others to institutionalize the change.

The interest and demand for cooperative learning programs have been increasing at an accelerating rate over the last decade and there is not a sufficient supply of well-trained experts to train teachers and administrators in these skills. ICCCR is currently working to bring together what Coleman calls "an eclectic group of providers to work as a team."

"We are trying to work collaboratively with other service providers like David and Roger Johnson at the University of Minnesota to offer comprehensive cooperative strategies for school change," he said.

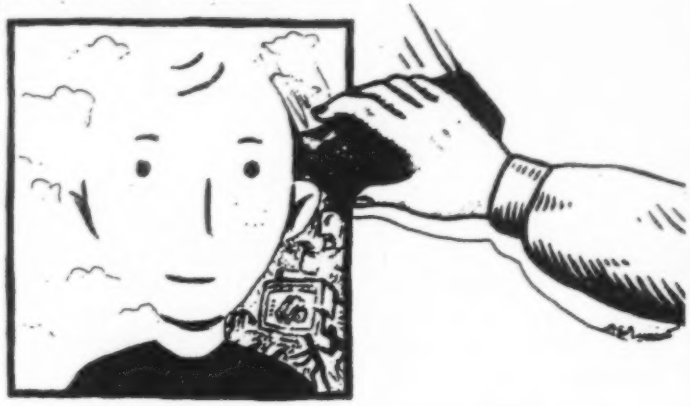
While the idea of a peaceful, conflict-free environment sounds good on paper, not everyone is ready to do what it takes to achieve those results.

Coleman added that ICCCR is currently designing intervention models designed to address conflicts that emerge relating to class and race. Collaborative models are not effective in conflicts related to such power struggles.

"When groups feel oppressed by the system and marginalized and when the system is not fair and just, it can elicit direct violence or sabotage," Coleman explained. "If dealt with effectively, the problem can change the institution and what the institution does. If not dealt with effectively, these problems can go underground and come up later in a more violent form."

Working to Make a Difference

Despite the fact that the number of school killings has dropped in the last eight years, concern about school violence remains high. Teachers College is also concerned about these issues. While the answers to the problem of violence in the schools may not come easily, researchers at the College are continuing to investigate the problems, the causes and the solutions. Through conferences and publications, our faculty and institutes provide a forum for discussion about these issues with experts who have done the research. In reaching out to schools and communities with programs that can help forge a solution to the problem of school violence, ICCCR is putting research to work and providing new areas of study that may enhance the effectiveness of these solutions. In these and other ways, Teachers College continues in its mission to prepare future leaders in education to meet the needs of the new century's teachers, students and administrators.



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